

Interviewing Tips

When Interviewing for a job involving SAP there is a pretty good chance that the people doing the interview and making the hiring decision really do not know anything about SAP, and in many situations, do not even have any SAP log ins. Here you can dazzle them with just some standard APICS terms, with maybe a few big words thrown in to make you sound more erudite (it is ok if you need pause for a moment if you need to go to Dictionary.com - I used this word deliberately to create the appearance of my being an erudite fellow).

Talk about Materials Masters, data clean up and data scrubs, Standard Work for Planning, Kaizen bursts, how you really want to move away from push and into more lean, talk about flow and kanbans, and most importantly nod in agreement when the interviewer tries to contribute, no matter how off the wall the comment contributed is. At some point, lean in a little when they are making a particular point, and nod faster, saying "yes, yes..." several times, then say "Yes, you really get it! It's great to talk with someone who really gets it". And then sit back and smile, a little in awe of them.

Now if the person does have some SAP experience, you will have to approach this a bit differently. For starters, you will need to actually know something about SAP.

There is a pretty good chance you will remember from the prior page that it is a German system, but after that you might get fuzzy. Let me help you by helping you to concentrate on a few key concepts.

Good topics to bring up are:

- Forecast, Forecast Types, and Forecast Consumption Logic
- Production Planning, Discrete versus repetitive, and managing lean pull systems within SAP
- Inventory Analytics
- Materials Masters

There are several ways to manage forecast, and several ways to discuss them. First, the Forecast module discussion is in play. If you ask what forecast module the company uses, you will likely get one of three responses:

APO: this is the new standard SAP, and I know nothing about it. It does cost some coin to get though.

Flexible Planning: This is the old SAP standard, and is horrible. It is the reason why the third category exists. If this comes up at all, the best response really is "Wow, I did not realize anyone used that anymore". This lets you separate yourself from old school SAP, and helps start to build the escape clause/excuse for failure in case you do get hired and have to deal with it.

Bolt-on Systems: Here I know a little about these systems. First, the major ones are almost all massively cheaper, way easier to use, and deliver better results, than standard SAP. This explains in large part why companies resist them initially, but eventually some break through. With prices ranging from \$30k to \$500k to implement, and \$5k to \$30k to maintain license each year (depends on the seats), the results really depend on the quality of your people. Most of the software can do the same things (except the horrid Flexible Planning module).

A lower priced system with a solid analyst is significantly better than the best system with a mediocre analyst. The point here is the analyst is more important than the system, and will do a better job selecting the system than the manager. And often they will choose a lower cost system. Do not take the human out of the equation, and do not look for an SAP solution to an execution problem.

A Production Planning discussion will probably involve at some point a discussion of discrete work orders or repetitive work orders, and sometimes depending on the industry a discussion on flow planning. I know nothing of flow planning, but visualize vast quantities of beer moving down crystal clear pipelines to large metallic vats, poised to bring joy to all the world, just like SAP. But beyond my beer fantasy, I have nothing to share with you on this flow SAP planning thing, assuming it exists, so on with the discussion of repetitive versus discrete.

Both repetitive and discrete are very valid planning techniques. There are some points that I have heard debated, and some application details, that could be discussion points, but I would state they are both valid techniques, it is the point of application, how they are used, and the “maturity of the manufacturing environment” that really matters. Dropping key words like flow, point of use, kanbans, and “reduced transactional activity” can all help in the discussion.

Emphasize that a good SAP transaction will never fix a bad manufacturing process. If you do this right, you can create an appearance of knowledge that lets you emerge as Alpha Dog for the rest of the interview. And if you get hired, and things stay screwed up, you can blame someone else for “bad execution”.

Secondly, your work environment really matters. If you are in a pick from stockroom per order environment, you have to use work orders and accompanying pick lists. Do not even think about repetitive until you have some kind of point of use assembly and things like that. Be a little adamant, lean forward, gesticulate a little, and make it a defining moment of this portion of the interview. This allows you to drag some lean into the conversation again and can again add to the Alpha Dog status you should be acquiring at this point.

Think about it, who can defeat a Lean Expert who is also SAP expert? Answer: No one! So start thinking about who will be your breeding partners, because you are totally Alpha (Sexually Active Person), moving up river to spawn like crazy, and then maybe die.

Next move on to Inventory Analytics, and pound away on phrases like Standard SAP transactions, and Inventory Analytics, and the various MC transactions on this site. I would also talk about $Y=f(x)$ and how inventory is really an output of processes, and until you fix the process, and the process elements; you will not build lasting change.

As a general note, process is a good word, but do not use it where you do not have an example of a process that was broken, that you heroically fixed, while changing the culture around it, all by yourself. I mean someone had to get Little Timmy out of the well, you might as well claim it was you. It is not like little Timmy is real, or any of the events really happened, and you are not hurting anyone so how could any of this be lying?

Finally, if there is a Materials Master geek in the room, you need to assess how open the materials master is to people who can make changes to it (lead times, safety stock, planning types, etc.). If everyone has access to it, and you are approaching the end of your career, you should continue to interview only if you are really looking to coast your way out, because nothing will improve and this job really will not enhance your resume (it cannot, they are going down, down, down). This is doubly true if the Lean and Six Sigma folks are playing in there.

Regardless of where you end up though in the interview, take a peek at MRP 1 through 4, the WM tabs, and forecasting tabs, show some understanding of planning types, etc., and you should get by a materials master freak. These people are really just to be happy to be allowed out and to be allowed to talk to people. They do not have much of a life, so throw them a bone and say “You know, people do not realize how important good data integrity is...” and leave it at that. They will do most of the talking for you after that, and love you for allowing it. Watch out for spittle if they start getting really animated, just slide your chair back and move out of range. If you do get hired, and for some reason you take the job, avoid them at all times. They will want to talk to you more, constantly, and sit at your lunch table, because you are now their only work friend.